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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [MARR](#) [GG](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: RUSSIAN MFA REACTION ON KODORI INCIDENT

REF: A. TBILISI 534 AND PREV. B. MOSCOW 405

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reason: 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary: DFM Karasin told Ambassador March 12 -- and the MFA repeated March 13 -- that Russia was not involved in the March 11 firing incident in Georgia's Kodori Gorge. The CIS PKF had observed firing in the region, but the GOR had no further information and would await the results of the UNOMIG investigation. An MFA official suspected a Georgian "provocation" and denied that the MFA's March 12 press statement on Kodori was an accusation against the Georgians, a change in position on Abkhazia negotiations, or rhetorical excess. Ambassador repeated our concerns March 14 to Acting FM Denisov, who replied that the GOR would see what UNOMIG concluded, and would try to "calm the situation." End summary.

¶2. (C) Ambassador called DFM Karasin March 12 to ask for information on the March 11 firing incident in the Upper Kodori Valley (Ref. A). Karasin denied Russian involvement, but had no information beyond that. Ambassador urged that FM Lavrov accept a call from Georgian FM Bezhuashvili. Karasin assured Ambassador the two foreign ministers would talk.

¶3. (C) On March 13 we met with Dmitriy Tarabrin, MFA 4th CIS Department Deputy Director. Tarabrin repeated the denial of Russian involvement. He claimed that the Georgian DCM had called him about it at 10:45 P.M. Moscow time (11:45 PM Tbilisi time) on March 11 -- 15 minutes, he said, before the incident even began. (Comment: Tarabrin is off on the timing as we understand it. End comment.) The Georgians control the entirety of the Upper Kodori Valley. Their involvement "cannot be ruled out," Tarabrin claimed.

¶4. (C) Tarabrin said the CIS PKF had observed three bursts of automatic weapons fire and two explosive flashes. He said we would have to wait for the results of investigations. Tarabrin was aware that UNOMIG was going to the scene, but was unaware that this was a joint investigation with the CIS PKF, Abkhaz and Georgians as well. Tarabrin categorically denied any Russian helicopters were involved in the incident. The terrain, weather and darkness at the time of the incident made such a flight next to impossible, and besides, he asked, what could Russia possibly gain from such an incident?

¶5. (C) We said we hoped the incident would not become an occasion for mutual accusations and sharp rhetoric. We welcomed the March 12 Lavrov-Bezhuashvili phone call, but drew Tarabrin's attention to the MFA's March 12 statement to the press on the issue, which accuses Georgia of creating the basic tensions in the region. In addition the statement, by its use of terminology, appears to be trying to lend legitimacy to the de facto Abkhaz authorities. Tarabrin said the Russians are not accusing the Georgians of anything, but the cause of the basic tension in the region is the presence of Georgian armed forces and the "irritating" deployment of

the "Abkhaz Government in Exile" in the Upper Kodori Valley. We replied that we did not see any connection between the Georgian or "G-i-E" presence and this incident.

¶16. (C) We asked Tarabrin about the press statement's reiteration of a demand to withdraw "Georgian armed formations." The U.S. recognizes Georgia's right and duty to provide security for the region with armed police. Moreover, we understood from Russian statements -- to PolMinCouns here in Moscow (Ref B) and to EUR DAS Bryza during the February FSG meeting in Geneva -- that Russia's concern was with an "offensive" capability, not with an armed police presence per se. Was Russia changing its constructive policy? Tarabrin checked the statement and confirmed that Russia is not changing its policy, just using the wording of UNSCR 1716. He added that the Georgian police presence should be "appropriate" for the population of the Upper Kodori Valley. In that regard, Tarabrin called for building confidence between the Abkhaz and Georgian sides, including through the renewal of quadripartite security talks in Chuburkhinja involving the Georgians, Abkhaz, CIS PKF and UNOMIG.

¶17. (C) Ambassador repeated our concerns March 14 both to Acting FM Denisov and Security Council Secretary Igor Ivanov. Denisov replied that the GOR would see what the UNOMIG investigation concluded and try to "calm the situation."

¶18. (C) Comment: The Russian MFA statement seems to have been written on auto-pilot. It sounded old themes from the Abkhazia negotiations without thinking through their implications in this context. The insinuation that the Georgians were somehow responsible for the incident is also an atavism. As we all await whatever conclusions UNOMIG and the joint investigation may be able to draw, the task

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at hand is to ensure that, whatever the perpetrators had in mind, the incident does not escalate beyond minor damage to a few buildings.
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